

# ***Shaping Their Future: Recommendations for Reform of the Higher School Certificate***

New South Wales. Board of Studies, 2002 (Prepared by Barry McGaw)

## **Overview of the document**

170 page report prepared by Barry McGaw. The report follows on from the green paper, Their Future: Options for Reform of the Higher School Certificate. It makes 26 recommendations for the Higher School Certificate's (HSC) reform.

## **Keywords**

New curriculum structure; Key Learning Areas; equity; HSC; statement of purpose.

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### 1. PURPOSES OF SENIOR SECONDARY EDUCATION

- Notes that senior secondary is “only one piece in the fabric of education”. (p. 1)
- Notes that students differ substantially in their interests and skills and that schooling must cover diversity of individual purpose and need.
- Discusses the Green Paper and the public response, noting that there were over 1,000 written submissions. Notes that the Green Paper presented 16 curriculum options, 14 assessment and reporting options and 10 options dealing with selection of school leavers for further education and employment for response and discussion.
- Discusses the context of the review in terms of increasing retention and how to cater for the 2/3 of students who continue to senior secondary, and how to retain more of the remainder that leave “since they are generally ill-prepared for adult life”. (p. 1)
- Overviews patterns of student pathways for cohort who completed HSC in 1995 and notes that:
  - 37% went on to university;
  - 33% went on to vocational education and training;
  - 8% went on to full-time employment with no further education or training;
  - 12% went on to part-time employment with no further education or training;
  - 8% went on to unemployment; and
  - 2% went back to a school or a TAFE college to complete the HSC. (p. 2)
- Overviews comments in the submissions including criticisms of present purposes of the HSC, the impact of student diversity, the need to protect the purposes of the most able students, and maintaining comprehensive arrangements. Summarises other submissions which addressed the purpose of senior secondary as a preparation for adult life, as an end in itself, and as an instrument for social change through reducing social inequities.
- States that “The Charter for this Review of the Higher School Certificate reflects an acceptance of the past broadening of purpose for the Certificate, as the student body has grown and diversified, and a commitment to maintaining a broad purpose under which differentiated individual purposes can be pursued. The Charter declares that one of the principles of this Review is that the Higher School Certificate will be: a qualification that is sufficiently broadly-based to provide a quality grounding in knowledge and skills for further tertiary study while, at the same time, providing an appropriate platform for students wishing to pursue vocational or on-the-job training. In light this commitment, and in sympathy with those submissions that argued for a broad conception of purpose, Recommendation 1 is offered as a statement of purpose for the Higher School Certificate.” (p. 7)
- Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 1: That the purpose of the Higher School Certificate be to:
    - Provide a curriculum structure which encourages students to complete secondary education;
    - Foster the intellectual, social and moral development of all students who choose to remain, in particular developing their knowledge, skills and attitudes in the fields of study they choose; capacity to manage their own learning; desire to continue learning in formal or informal settings after school; their capacity to work together with others and their respect for the cultural diversity of Australian society;
    - Provide a flexible structure within which students can prepare for further education and training, employment and full and active

- participation as citizens;
    - Provide formal assessment and certification of students' achievements;
    - Provide a context within which schools also have the opportunity to foster students' physical and spiritual development. (p. 7)
- Notes that the needs of special groups are not addressed separately, but rather it is envisaged that the reforms will provide a structure which will "accommodate the needs of all who might enrol". (p. 8)
- Lists the principles for equity in education established by the NSW government as follows:
  - "Everyone is entitled to high quality education and training programs that provide recognised credentials and clear pathways to employment and lifelong learning. The outcomes of education and training should not depend on factors beyond the learner's control or influence.
  - In the allocation of public resources, priority is given to narrowing those gaps in education and training outcomes that reflect prevailing social inequalities.
  - All young people are entitled, as a minimum, to be able to complete their school education to Year 12 or a vocational education equivalent.
  - The diversity of the population is recognised and valued by inclusive approaches to the development, conduct and evaluation of programs.
  - A demonstrated commitment to these equity principles and practices is a core responsibility for all those involved in education and training." (p. 8)

## 2. CURRICULUM

- Begins by noting that the HSC was introduced as a two year program in 1994 with Year 11 being the preliminary and Year 12 being the HSC.
- Notes that subjects offered for study are grouped into eight Key Learning Areas, which are the same as those used by the Board of Studies to structure the New South Wales curriculum in junior secondary education and build on the six used in primary education. Identifies the eight KLAs as:
  - English;
  - Mathematics;
  - Science;
  - Human Society and its Environment;
  - Technological and Applied Studies;
  - Languages other than English;
  - Creative Arts; and
  - Personal Development, Health and Physical Education.
- Notes the different types of courses students can choose from including Board developed courses, Board endorsed courses, content-endorsed courses and school-designed courses and notes the increase in courses available in the HSC.

### Shaping the curriculum

- Notes that the broadening of the curriculum "was a response to the rapidly increasing participation rates in senior secondary education during the 1980s and early 1990s". (p. 11)
- Notes that the key question of Green Paper was "whether the broadening of the range of studies on offer, by the addition of subjects and courses within subjects, was in the best interests of the students choosing to stay at school". (p. 8)
- Discusses the current picture which involves a highly differentiated curriculum with 145 Board-developed courses in 73 subjects as well as Board-endorsed courses.

## Range of subjects to be offered

- Discusses the range of subjects to be offered and questions that arose from the submissions. Discusses how the extent of provision is determined, the present situation, the diverse needs of students and the consequent importance of curriculum diversity, the problem of rigour and how to reduce overlap between courses.
- Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 2: “That the extent of overlap between existing subjects, in all cases where the possibility of enrolment in more than one of the subjects is permitted, be reviewed with a view to removing one of the courses, revising the course descriptions to remove overlap or introduce exclusion rules to deny students the possibility of enrolling in both courses.” (p. 14)
- Discusses the problems arising from courses with small enrolments and the criteria for adding or withdrawing subjects and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 3: That, for any new Board-developed course in new or existing subjects to be introduced, there must be satisfactory evidence of need for the course and of its quality provided through:
    - A clear rationale and statement of purpose for the course;
    - The learning outcomes students are expected to achieve;
    - Evidence that the learning outcomes are set at an appropriate standard;
    - Prior knowledge assumed in students enrolling in the course;
    - The manner in which that prior knowledge will be built upon;
    - An identification of the subsequent uses students might make of the learning from the course;
    - Internal and external assessment procedures to be used;
    - The relationship of the course to existing courses with which it might be thought to overlap;
    - Evidence of demand for the course, based where possible on enrolments in any Board-endorsed course from which the proposed Board-developed course has emerged;
    - An analysis of the likely impact on school timetables;
    - Evidence about the availability of suitably qualified teachers;
    - Evidence that the course can be taught and examined within the resources usually available to schools. (p. 17)
- Notes the importance of this criterion and argues that it should not only govern the introduction of new courses but should also be used to evaluate existing courses and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 4: “That the criteria for the introduction of new courses, set out in Recommendation 3, be applied to a review of all existing Board-developed courses, placing on notice for removal or reorganisation all courses that fail to satisfy the criteria.” (p. 17)
- Notes that the secondary school curriculum has been organised around eight Key Learning Areas since 1989. Discusses some views presented on KLAs in submissions particularly in terms of complaints about their structure and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 5: “That the use of the Key Learning Area structure in the Higher School Certificate be abandoned.” (p. 18)
- Discusses specific subject considerations, including patterns of studies and comments in submissions. In relation to General Studies and Applied Studies notes a particular problem of overlap with other subjects and makes the following recommendations:
  - Recommendation 6: “That the subject *General Studies* be deleted.” (p. 20)

- Recommendation 7: “That the subject *Applied Studies* be deleted.” (p. 22)
- Discusses Life Management Studies, noting that students in this subject “generally do not do well in their other subjects” (p. 23). Summarises responses to the suggestion in the Green Paper that the subject might be dropped or a case made for its retention with arguments for and against: those supporting retention of the subject noted that it contained unique components, but those supporting abolition expressed concerns about rigour and claimed it was less demanding than other subjects. Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 8: “That *Life Management Studies* be substantially revised to upgrade it and remove overlap with junior secondary school courses and remove overlap with other Higher School Certificate subjects.” (p. 25)
- Notes that “the case of Languages other than English is complicated because there are clear social as well as educational policies involved in any decision about a course” (p. 25). Discusses problems concerning low enrolments, rigour for subjects taken outside school and that good results could be achieved with little effort for background speakers. Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 9: “That the curriculum for all courses in Languages other than English offered for background speakers of the languages, both courses explicitly labelled ‘Background Speaker’ and community languages taken predominantly or exclusively by background speakers, be structured to ensure that their standard is equivalent to that of the Higher School Certificate courses in English.” (p. 27)
- Overviews Distinction courses, noting that they are taken as university subjects without counting towards credit for undergraduate study and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 10: “That Distinction courses be deleted and that arrangements be established under which advanced students might enrol in university undergraduate courses as part of their Higher School Certificate and then, on successful completion, obtain as well credit towards university study.” (p. 28)
- Overviews Board-endorsed courses, noting that some submissions argued that the need for Board-endorsed subjects has reduced with the increase of Board-developed courses. Notes that the development of vocational education and training options were said to reduce need for alternatives to Board-developed courses but that strong arguments were also made for the retention of such courses in that school-developed courses “have often been the first signal of emerging needs and interests”. (p. 29) Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 11: “That the practice of offering Content-endorsed courses in place of School-designed courses as areas of common interest emerge be maintained but no active steps be taken to cut the numbers of School-designed courses.” (p. 29)

### **Range of courses to be offered within subjects**

- Discusses the range of courses offered within subjects, how to determine the extent of provision, respond to student diversity, and how to best organise and structure courses within subjects. This discussion includes specific subject considerations for English, English as a second language, Mathematics, Science, History, LOTE, Music, Classical Ballet, and Dance, Drama and Personal Development, Health, Physical Education.

- Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 12: That the following structure for courses within subjects be adopted:
    - A basic curriculum structure with two 2-unit courses in each subject: one with a level of intellectual demand equivalent to current 3-unit courses, and the other less demanding, and with a component of the curriculum common to both courses so that a result can be located on a single scale for the subject;
    - In English, a hierarchical sequence of two 2-unit courses and a third course in Literature that might be taken alone or in combination with the more demanding of the other two courses;
    - A new subject, English as a Second Language, as a 2-unit course;
    - In Mathematics, a hierarchical sequence of three 2-unit courses: merging the current Mathematics in Society and Mathematics in Practice courses to form one course; with some components of each pair of adjacent courses common, and with an additional 2-unit Advanced Mathematics course that can be taken only in conjunction with the most demanding of the other three courses;
    - In Science, a single integrated 2-unit course designed for students not wanting to proceed to higher education in a science field and 2-unit courses in Biology, Chemistry, Geology and Physics for students preparing for further study in science;
    - In Classical Ballet, one 2-unit course;
    - In Languages other than English: in all priority languages, one standard 2-unit course, a 2-unit course for beginners and a 2-unit course for background speakers; in all community languages other than those designated as priority languages, one 2-unit background-speaker course; in all other languages not offered in the junior secondary school, only a 2-unit beginner course; and in all other languages, a single 2-unit standard course; with the proviso that small enrolment courses be maintained only under the National Assessment Framework for Languages at Senior Secondary Level;
    - In all other subjects that presently have one 3-unit and one or two 2-unit courses; two 2-unit courses arranged hierarchically with overlapping content;
    - In all subjects that presently have one 2-unit course, maintenance of that course, unless a compelling case can be made that the diversity of students enrolling in it requires the provision of two hierarchically related, and overlapping, 2-unit courses. (p. 46)

### **Place of vocational studies**

- Notes that vocational studies were added to the HSC in the mid-1980s soon after the rapid increase in retention rates to Years 11 and 12 and following recommendations in the Swan-McKinnon Report.
- Overviews changes in the 1990s and current provision. Outlines the Joint Secondary Schools TAFE Program, Training in Retail and Commerce (TRAC), Vocational Content-endorsed Courses, and Industry Studies, Higher School Certificate through TAFE colleges, Full Higher School Certificate program in TAFE, Higher School Certificate in TAFE Pathway and the Tertiary Preparation Certificate.
- Discusses the nature of vocational education and training in the context of changing

transitions to the workforce. Summarises views expressed in the submissions, including the benefit of workplace learning and ways of encouraging the combining paid work and senior secondary education and outlines the principles for inclusion of vocational studies.

- Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 13: That, as principles to guide the development of vocational education and training within the Higher School Certificate, it be accepted that vocational education and training:
    - Is potentially appropriate for all students in the Higher School Certificate and should be accessible to all, including those who move from secondary to higher education;
    - Should be offered in sufficient variety to satisfy different student needs;
    - Should contribute to the broad education of students;
    - Should be accredited by both secondary and vocational education authorities;
    - Should be offered in response to demand established from industry needs, using the State industry training profile;
    - Should offer training relevant to the industries in the State training profile rather than to narrowly focused occupations or the specific needs of single enterprises;
    - Should result, on successful completion, in the award of a vocational qualification or in a clearly established credit towards such a qualification; should have clear links to post-school destinations, particularly further vocational education and training and employment;
    - Should be developed in collaboration between the secondary education and vocational education and training sectors and industry; and
    - Should have a component of structured work place training to allow for competencies to be developed and assessed in the workplace to the extent deemed appropriate by industry through the course accreditation processes. (p. 64)
- Notes that these principles have “direct implications for the design of vocational education and training courses in the Higher School Certificate.” (p. 65)
- Lists five dot points of particular implications, including that vocational education and training should not be designed only for students considered ‘non-academic’, that a variety of courses should be offered, that courses should contribute to the broader education of students, and that students should be able to choose vocational studies that keep open pathways to higher education.
- Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 14: That the principles in Recommendation 13 be applied to vocational education and training curriculum in the Higher School Certificate to:
    - Remove duplication in offerings in the same content area;
    - Bring all vocational education and training courses within a single framework under broad industry groupings, consistent with the State training profile;
    - Identify which components of general Higher School Certificate courses can satisfy the requirements of vocational education and training modules and develop explicit accreditation and credit rules for these components;

- Enhance the contribution of the courses to the broader education of students;
  - Determine which vocational education and training courses can count towards university entrance;
  - With this task undertaken collaboratively by secondary, vocational and university education authorities and industry representatives. (p. 66)
- Discusses ‘employment related key-competencies’ and lists seven as defined by Finn and Mayer. Notes positive and negative comments within the submissions and also reiterates the importance of attention to employment related key competencies in curriculum planning. Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 15: “That all syllabus documents explicitly identify the ways in which particular key competencies are expected to be developed by students taking the course.” (p. 67)

### **Constraints on student choice**

- Discusses constraints on student choice and notes that what subjects are offered within the HSC is the “first major curriculum question. What constraints might be imposed, if any, on students’ choice is the second” (p. 67). Refers to options put forward in the Green Paper and discusses a common core, mandatory breadth and freedom of choice and puts forward the following recommendation for greater balance:
  - Recommendation 16: That, to qualify for the Higher School Certificate, students be required to complete:
    - A minimum of 12 units of study;
    - At least two units in a Board-developed course in English;
    - At least six units in Board-developed course. (p. 67)

### **Structure of the Curriculum**

- Begins by noting that the HSC curriculum depends on the curriculum in the years that precede it and that therefore the HSC to some extent also shapes the curriculum for earlier years.
- Discusses objectives, outcomes and standards, background and current arrangements.
- Overviews the submissions and discusses the Preliminary-Higher School Certificate course structure (Year 11 or the equivalent preliminary to the HSC in Year 12). Notes that a discussion of the curriculum arrangements for the last two years of secondary schooling opens up discussions about the structure of secondary schooling more broadly.
- Discusses current arrangements and how the junior years of secondary schooling might be structured including as a 3+3 arrangement of junior and senior secondary, a 3+2+1 arrangement and a modular course structure. Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 17: “That the distinction between Preliminary and Higher School Certificate Courses be retained with:
    - Preliminary courses commencing at any time from the commencement of Term 4 in Year 10;
    - Higher School Certificate courses commencing in Term 4 in Year 11; and
    - External examinations and school-based assessments covering the content of only the Higher School Certificate courses, subject to the



provision that knowledge of the content of the Preliminary courses may be assume.” (p. 79)

- Notes that the rationale for starting HSC courses in Term 4 of Year 11 is to ensure a full 12 months of courses.
- Notes widespread dissatisfaction with the School Certificate, that Year 10 is no longer an exit point for the majority of students and that there is no certificate for those students who leave school after Year 10 but before the end of Year 12. Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 18: “That the School Certificate be abolished and replaced, for all students leaving school at any time from the end of Year 10 up to the time at which they are eligible for a Higher School Certificate, by a *Statement of Achievement*, issued under authority of the Board of Studies and recording:
    - The student’s results on state-wide tests in at least literacy and numeracy towards the end of Year 10 (or in Year 11 if the student chooses to repeat the tests); and
    - School-based results in all courses completed in Year 10 and subsequently, prior to departure from school.” (p. 80)

### **3. ASSESSMENT AND REPORTING**

#### **Assessment methods**

- Overviews the general purposes of assessment and reporting, summarises the submissions on assessment methods and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendations 19: That assessment strategies for Board-developed Higher School Certificate courses be extended with:
    - Reviews of syllabuses and external assessment strategies, on a cyclical basis, to identify ways in which assessment strategies might be extended and to estimate costs of implementation as a basis for decision making;
    - Clear guidelines for schools about the range and balance of school-based assessments to be used, to ensure that school-based assessment do not simply mimic the external examinations while still providing students with some experience of working under examination conditions;
    - Obligations on schools to ensure conformity with the breadth requirements for school based assessments: attested to in a formal declaration; and reviewed by personnel external to the school;
    - Reports to schools of the correlation between external and school-based assessment, accompanied by interpretations that make clear that maximising the correlation is not the goal of the school-based assessment. (p. 84)

#### **Adjusting and combining assessments**

- Notes that there is considerable discussion of adjusting and combining assessments, making school-based assessments comparable.
- Summarises the content of submissions and recommends the continuation of moderated school-based assessment as follows:
  - Recommendation 20: “That statistical moderation of school-based assessments against external assessments be maintained in preference to the adoption of consensus moderation.” (p. 86)

## Reporting students' results

- Discusses the reporting of student's results and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 21: That a standards-referenced approach to assessment be adopted for the Higher School Certificate by developing achievement scales for each subject through:
    - An analysis of the Higher School Certificate examination results in all courses, commencing with the 1996 examinations, to: clarify the performance scales on which student achievements and questions or task difficulties can be represented within the course, or, where courses are linked by a component of common assessment, across those courses within the subject; develop descriptors of what the scales measure in broad bands along the range from low to high performance; and identify examination questions and tasks located in the various bands to amplify the meaning of the bands;
    - Provision of these scales and the sample questions and tasks to schools, together with information about the distribution of student achievements on the scale, to give teachers an indication of the learning outcomes currently being achieved in each subject; and
    - Revision of curriculum documents to reflect the course structure proposed in recommendation 12 and to incorporate the achievement scales. (p. 97)

## Presentation of results

- Discusses the presentation of results and recommends:
  - Recommendation 22: That for the reporting of students' results:
    - Numerical values in the range 20 to 70 be allocated to the scales on which student achievement levels and the difficulty levels of examination questions and tasks are represented in each subject; and
    - Students receive: for each course completed, a graphical representation of the performance scale for the subject showing the location of the student's achievement level, separately for external and school-based assessment, in each course completed, school-based assessments having first been statistically moderated against the external assessments; and a summary sheet giving the numerical values of the scale locations of their external and school-based assessments and a 50:50 combination of those assessments, together with the descriptor for the band in which their achievement level lies, to indicate in a summary form what they know and are able to do in the subject. (p. 99)
- Overviews the submissions and discusses problems with pass/fail classification of results and other grading systems such as A, B, C etc. or High Distinction, Distinction, etc. and recommends the following:
  - Recommendation 23: "That there be no use of the categories 'pass' or 'fail' or of other grades in the reporting of students' results." (p. 100)
- Discusses employment related key competencies and suggests that because they are 'significantly context dependent' that schools are best placed to deal with assessment and reporting. Makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 24: "That there be no central reporting of students' performance levels on the employment-related key competencies, but that

schools have the option of providing reports in the ways which they might themselves determine.” (p. 100)

#### **4. SELECTION FOR POST-SCHOOL DESTINATIONS**

- Overviews destinations and notes that performance in the HSC is key to obtaining success in the destination sought.
- Discusses problems with the tertiary entrance rank, noting that “It has become a label for students and a means for easy comparison, whether fair or not, among students and schools. It dominates post-Higher School Certificate discussions. In fact, discussion of virtually any aspect of senior secondary education in New South Wales often quickly becomes a discussion of the Tertiary Entrance Rank rather than the Higher School Certificate.” (p. 101)
- Notes the widespread hostility toward the Tertiary Entrance Rank, outlines proposed changes to university selection procedures and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 25: That university authorities continue to be supplied with Higher School Certificate results for use in selection of students on the following conditions:
    - They be given results for only those students who have applied for admission to university;
    - They use any aggregate index only to identify three broad groupings in the applications for each course: a group clearly qualified for admission; a group clearly not qualified for admission, and a group above and below a notional cut-off, equivalent to at least ten percent of candidates, whose detailed course results are to be considered in addition to the index and any other supplementary information the university chooses, before a final admissions decision is made;
    - Any selection indices calculated from students’ results: be advised to students direct, not by mailing from the Board of Studies, after the release date for the Higher School Certificate, and in a form that does not have the appearance of a formal certificate; individual results be treated as confidential and not provided to other parties, including the Board of Studies, except for policy research purposes in agencies which can guarantee to protect confidentiality of individual, school and system results; and summary information on the results of scaling by course continue to be made available, including to schools;
    - They routinely undertake and report publicly on the validity of their uses of the Higher School Certificate results in selection decisions.

That universities be encouraged to:

- Replace the term ‘tertiary’ with the term ‘university’ in the name of the selection index;
- Continue to combine 50:50 external and statistically moderated school-based assessments provide by the secondary education authorities for each course;
- Use a score scale rather than a percentile rank;
- Remove the categorisation of courses into Categories A and B and include more vocational education and training courses in the list of course that may count towards a Tertiary Entrance Rank, but only if the new course structure within subjects proposed in Recommendation 12 is adopted;

- Consider results from a student’s best ten units, with a restriction of no more than four units of vocational education and training courses, or, if the universities are not willing to include additional vocational education and training courses in the list of courses that may count, consider results from only the student’s best eight units;
  - Scale all course results on a similar basis, with whatever variations in procedures are required for small candidate courses, but with no special consideration for Languages other than English of the kind involved in the current practice of using scaled results in French and German courses to locate the others; and
  - Set a minimum performance level in English as a prerequisite rather than including English as a mandatory component of the selection index; investigate the use of separate mathematics-science-technology and humanities-social sciences-creative arts indices derived from Higher School Certificate results for selection into selected courses at university. (pp. 116-117)
- Briefly discusses the implications for other post-school selection but notes that university has been the focus of the discussion because it accounts for 70 percent of students completing their HSC.

## 5. NEXT STEPS

- Sets out proposals for the implementation of recommendations, including the proposed action and the proposed date at which changes should come into effect.
- Notes that procedures of the Board are ‘extremely thorough’ but that its decision making procedures are somewhat ad-hoc. Provides examples of the Board’s “inability or unwillingness to address some difficult issues” including the scaling of results in English and the incoherent structure in Languages other than English. (p. 119)
- Notes the large membership of the Board and representation on the Board by a number of interest groups which “can make for much posturing on issues as a prelude to a decision”. (p. 119)
- Suggests that the Board would function better if it were smaller and if appointments were made based on expertise and background rather than being representative of an external agency or interest group and makes the following recommendation:
  - Recommendation 26: “That the membership of the Board of Studies be reorganised to create a smaller Board with membership reflecting personal expertise, interest in school education and diversity of professional and community experience, with members not being representatives of other agencies or interest groups.” (p. 120)